

# **A SYNOPSIS OF THE HISTORY OF THE LEICESTER BOROUGH BRIDEWELL AND / OR 'HOUSE OF CORRECTION'**

## **Transcribed from the Leicester Chronicle - Sat 23rd Jan 1841**

John Williams of Pegg's Green was committed by R. G. Creswell, Esq., on the 14th inst., to the '**House of Correction**' for 2 months for stealing on the 13th inst., a post and rail, forming part of a dead fence, the property of **Pegg's Green Colliery Co.**

## **Transcribed from the Leicester Mercury - Saturday 16th Sept 1837**

William Shaw and Jabez Barkby of Thringstone, colliers, committed for 1 month each to the '**House of Correction**', with hard labour, for absenting themselves from their work at **Pegg's Green Colliery**.

## **Transcribed from the Leicester Chronicle - Saturday March 1844**

Joseph Hewitt of Thringstone, Charged by John Price, agent to the **Pegg's Green Colliery Co.**, with neglecting his work, was committed to the '**House of Correction**', at Leicester, for one calendar month, his wages to be abated during that period.

## **Transcribed from the Leicester Journal – April 19<sup>th</sup> 1844**

### **Ashby de la Zouch Petty Sessions**

George Perry of Thringstone, was charged by the Pegg's Green Colliery Company with neglecting his work. It appeared that the defendant had signed a written contract to serve the company as a Collier, to work six whole days, and to give 14 days notice before leaving. The defendant had given the notice, and since then had only worked a quarter of a day, thereby causing a severe loss to the company. The defendant said he had joined the Miner's Union, and he was obliged to do a certain portion of work, if he did more, he should have to forfeit 2s. 6d. per day. The Magistrates considered the case clearly proved, **and they committed him for three months to the 'House of correction' to hard labour**. Several other men from the same colliery, who had signed similar contracts were committed for the same period on Monday last. It is believed that this mode of proceeding has had good effect, as the men at the Pegg's Green Colliery are for the most part of them now at work.

**BY SAMUEL T STEWART - MAY 2025**

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The front cover depicts four local NW Leicestershire examples of people being sent to '**The House of Correction**', Leicester for what would now be considered as being minor and non custodial offences.

Although the examples given have connections to coal mining, a search of the newspapers during that period will reveal numerous examples of people being sent to the 'House of Correction' in Leicester. Many found, relate to local coal mines where an employee absented himself from work was seen as a serious crime in the early 1800s. Some were subjected to far more severe punishment for similar crimes, than being sent to the 'House of Correction' (with or without hard labour), and they were often sent to gaol with hard labour.



**The Borough Gaol (centre), on Highcross Street, Leicester  
Drawn by local artist John Flower in 1830. Note the High Cross.**

*John Flower (14 Oct 1793 – 29 Nov 1861) was an English landscape and architectural artist known to locals as "the Leicester artist". Flower was born in Leicester, the son of John Flower, a wool comber, and his wife Mary, whose family had for generations owned the Castle Mill on the River Soar*

A Borough Gaol had apparently existed in the area of High Cross Street from 1297 but the latest building was constructed and opened in 1792/3. Prior to 1804, a County Bridewell, or House of Correction, was located adjacent to the Leicester County Gaol on Blue Boar Lane, off the West Side of High Cross street. Although the new Welford Road Gaol was built in 1828, the Borough Gaol continued to be used with the addition of a Bridewell (Reform School) used by both men and women, which moved to the rear of the gaol. In 1829, **following purchase by the Borough magistrates, a house of correction was added to the male prisoner's court (exercise yard) c.1836**. This Gaol gradually fell into disrepair and was finally demolished in 1897.

A House of Correction was a type of institution, also known as a 'Bridewell', used primarily in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries in England. It was designed to house and reform petty offenders and vagrants through forced labour. The main purpose was to instil habits of industry and discourage idleness, begging and stealing etc.

- **Origins:**

'Houses of Correction' were part of the Poor Law system, intended to address the problems of poverty and vagrancy. The building of houses of correction came after the passing of an amendment to the Elizabethan Poor Law. However, the 'Houses of Correction' were not considered a part of the Elizabethan Poor Law system because the Act distinguished between settled poor and wandering poor.

**Purpose:**

They aimed to reform offenders through hard labour and discipline, not just imprisonment.

**Inmates:**

Vagrants, beggars, runaway apprentices, absentees from work, and those convicted of minor offenses were often sent to Houses of Correction.

**Punishment:**

Common punishments included hard labour (like milling grain or cleaning) and sometimes physical punishments like whipping.

**Evolution:**

While initially focused on vagrancy, Houses of Correction eventually became used more broadly for various minor offenses, and eventually, standard prisons became the primary method of punishment.

'Bridewells' were common names for 'Houses of Correction', which have been described as a type of prison used in Tudor times.

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**The philanthropist and prison reformer John Howard, described the Leicester Bridewell (House of Correction) as follows in 1784:-**

It had three rooms below for men: five above for women, one of those was not used because it was not secure. There were no chimneys. The Court (exercise yard) was not safe for prisoners to be allowed the use of it.

Allowance now - two penny worth of bread a day, after a months confinement. Clauses against spirituous liquors not hung up. There was a painted board stating - 'By order of the Court of Sessions 1778, that there shall be no ale or beer brought into the Prison on a Sunday, nor after Seven o'clock in the evening on a weekday'

In a former edition, I suggested, that if a wall were built with brick, instead of the day-wall there would be no need of a chain and log, to secure the prisoners in the court. (A 'day wall' in a prison was a wall, often within a cell, where inmates mark the passage of time by creating tally marks, often to count the days they have been incarcerated. These marks were typically

drawn or etched into the wall using various materials, like chalk, pencil, or even fingernails).

The apartments would also be more airy and men and women might be separated, if the narrow court were enlarged from the orchard, which was let by the keeper for £6 per annum.

At my last visit, I found the court had been enlarged, and a wall built, but there is not a proper separation of men and women. The prisoners are now without the chain.

This prison is white - washed once a year and kept remarkably neat and clean. The prisoners do not lie on the floors, but very properly, their mats are on cribs or bedsteads. The keeper is a wool-comber, his salary is £21; he pays window tax of 14s.

Prisoners committed from Easter Sessions :-

1799 to 1780 - forty four

1780 to 1781 - fifty nine.

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In 1804 , the Bridewell moved to new premises on free school lane at the rear of the County Gaol.

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### **From James Neild, prison writings in 1812 :-**

The former keeper Daniel Lambert, now replaced by William Philips - Salary £52 10s. He is also allowed mops, brooms pails, soap and every requisite for prison cleanliness.

**Chaplain** - none, but at my visit in 1807, the keeper told me his prisoners regularly attended prayers three times a week, and also prayers and sermons on Sundays, in the chapel of the County Gaol.

**Surgeon** - Mr. Maule replaced by Mr.Ludlam who makes a bill.

### **Number of Prisoners -**

Aug 23rd, 1803 - 7

Sept 26th, 1805 - 15

July 30th, 1807 - 17

Aug 22nd 1809 - 17

Allowance - One pound 6 ounces of bread per day, sent in loaves of 2lbs. 12oz, every other day from the bakers, and one pint of beer daily.

The new 'Bridewell', first inhabited in 1804, is situated in Free School Lane, and adjoins to the County Gaol in the wall for which there is a door of communication for the prisoners who go thither, to Chapel, where the sexes are properly placed in separate divisions out of the sight of each other. Here are two court yards for men and women, with dust-pens to receive ashes,

which in the County Gaol are much wanted? To each court yard is a day room.

A reception room is provided for prisoners to be examined by the surgeon, prior to their admission into the interior of the prison.

In the centre of the men's court is a small detached building, which contains a bath. There are nine sleeping cell all on the ground floor, 8ft x 5ft, with arched ceilings and boarded roofs. They are all supplied with two straw mattresses; lighted by an iron grating above each door, having an inside shutter, and all opening into the court yard, in which there are two convenient sewers.

The women's court is the same size as the former, and has four sleeping cells attached to it on the ground floor, fitted up in the same manner as those for the men. Three other such cells were built in 1809 on the women's side, and over them a large work room. The sewers are all judiciously placed, and not offensive.

Above the stairs are two rooms, set apart as infirmaries, and each have a large iron grated window, with a fire-place. There are also two large work-rooms, with similar windows, spinning wheels and stocking frames etc.

Those prisoners who work for themselves, and are not committed to hard labour, pay to the keeper 2s 6d in the pound out of their earnings; and as such have no County allowance for food. Those committed for hard labour, and can earn more than 10 shillings per week, keep the leftovers for themselves.

Prisoners who are discharged are sent away penniless. It is at least hoped that they are discharged in a morning??

There are no books provided, for the visiting magistrates to enter their remarks, a deficiency, which it would be highly useful to supply.

Neither the Act for preserving the health of prisoners, nor the clauses against spirituous liquors are hung up. The keeper showed me a bottle of gin, which he had taken from a person, who was bringing it into prison.